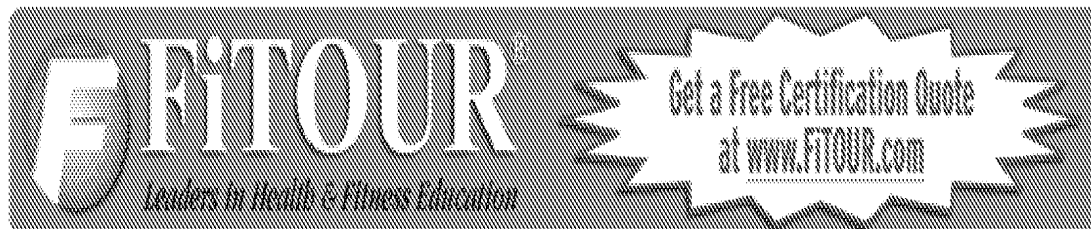


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Virtual Support

By Ronale Tucker Rhodes
July 1998

Instead of having an equipment repair technician traveling over hill and dale, you may soon have equipment repaired via the Internet.

It seems good service is getting harder and harder to come by. For the fitness industry, at a time when club members are becoming ever more critical, service is a crucial issue. If equipment is down and repairs take long, that can have a great effect on a club's bottom line. Industry manufacturers know this, and they are using technology, namely the Internet, to expand their offerings in the form of service and sales support.

Not all online support from manufacturers is or will be the same, however. Currently, sales and service via the Internet is still a growing business, with some companies offering the bare bones of what they eventually plan to offer. Many are using their site as a means of communication between club owners and the company, as well as providing troubleshooting pages and downloadable manuals. One manufacturer is even using the Internet as a 24-hour surveillance tool to ensure the equipment the club purchased is up and running properly. And a few, are even using their Web sites to sell products online.

A service tool

Club managers will soon have several online support options available to them. The most basic of this type of support is offering technical manuals on company Web sites. Tony Garcia of BroadcastVision, Agoura Hills, Calif., manufacturer of the wireless audio Broadcast TV system, says the BroadcastVision site is currently being upgraded to include manuals, technical support and troubleshooting documentation. Club owners can begin taking advantage of this support this month.

Field Automation for Service Technicians (FAST), Huntington Beach, Calif., is a new Internet-based business which will act as a centralized warehouse of fitness equipment parts. Planned for introduction in January 1999, the site will feature online technical

support and allow club equipment technicians to order parts and manuals directly from their computer. In addition, says co-owner Craig Athey, when ordering replacement parts, FAST employees will provide the additional support of maintaining a database of serial numbers to track current warranties that may cover the costs of repair.

Online software upgrades is another support service offered by manufacturers of interactive exercise stations. These companies are able to provide upgrades via a direct Internet link between their server and the clubs' exercise machines. Netpulse Communications, San Francisco, Calif., manufacturer of Netpulse Stations (cardiovascular equipment computer stations featuring a built-in Internet connection), provides automatic upgrades to its Internet software. "The software is always improving and we're adding features," says CEO Tom Proulx. "If we find a given feature doesn't work a certain way it ought to, we're able to constantly and incrementally improve our product over the Internet." Proulx adds that when upgrades are performed, they are automatically sent out over the Internet during nighttime hours. And since the software is self-explanatory for the user, no instructions or manuals are required, making automatic upgrades ideal.

Automatic software updates are also provided by FitLinxx, Stamford, Conn., manufacturer of the FitLinxx Interactive Fitness Network, which attaches to existing strength-training machines to interactively coach members to exercise properly and show progress. According to Brian Andrus, vice president of business development, the company maintains a server which has a direct link to all FitLinxx stations. From that server, the company can automatically upload new graphics, workout program files, etc. But even more specifically, the server provides them the capability to monitor each piece of equipment independently and upgrade specific pieces.

Plans to provide software upgrades are also in the works for Xystos, Ste. Foy, Que., manufacturer of the Interactive Fitness Environment, an interactive kiosk that provides access to the Internet. "Anytime there is a software upgrade, it will be done automatically by us," says vice president of interactive products Marc Onigman, who adds that the upgrades are scheduled for the fourth quarter this year. The company is also exploring an equipment maintenance program module, which will be offered as an option.

A link from the manufacturer's server to club equipment also provides companies with what could be considered a unique support concept: surveillance. For instance, each machine equipped with a Netpulse Station is constantly monitored via the Internet by Netpulse Communications to ensure that it is in working order. If, at any time, any station fails, a Netpulse technician can diagnose the problem and immediately notify the facility so the station can be repaired. "If any machine goes down for any reason, the most common one being that someone turns the power off," says Proulx, "we know about it usually before the club does."

In addition to monitoring the working condition of the machines, Netpulse constantly monitors the usage of the machines and provides monthly reports to club owners. For instance, Proulx says that they can report to the club owner how many people use the machines each day, the average number of minutes their workout sessions last, and even point out usage statistics for a specific machines. "Sometimes you'll see that one machine might be used significantly less than some of the others," explains Proulx. "That could tell you that the machine might have something wrong with it, or sometimes the internal components of the bike start to wear out and the machine isn't as mechanically healthy as some of the others." Netpulse also monitors incentive programs, such as its frequent flyer program that rewards individuals with frequent flyer miles for sticking to their exercise program.

FitLinxx is also able to monitor equipment performance. According to Andrus, their software allows them to monitor details from identifying whether a belt is stretching, to remotely adjusting calibration on the machine.

A sales tool

While industry manufacturers have put online support services at the forefront of their Internet agenda, online sales are also in the works, although few manufacturers currently allow club owners to purchase directly from their sites. One reason could be that the Web is just too new to the industry, and it will take some time for systems to be put in place. Another reason could be that it is

unknown just how widespread Internet use is among club owners. As such, the idea of purchasing products via computer could take some getting used to.

The complexity of some fitness equipment could also affect the decision to sell online. Online sales is the step beyond "branding" on the Web, or the mere posting of Web pages to showcase a company's product line, which is what most industry manufacturers currently offer. To help bridge the gap between branding and sales, many companies are starting to provide online demos of their products, rather than just static pages that act as electronic brochures. Proulx explains that visitors to their Web site can do just about anything on their Netpulse Station demo except "pedal" the exercise bike. And, Athey of FAST says that while the FAST site won't be in operation until 1999, visitors can currently run through a demo of how their site will work.

Right now, once products have been viewed online, visitors are required to telephone manufacturers' sales offices to make the purchase. Ideally, though, according to Proulx, the club [owner] will be able to go online, seek new 'Lifecycle X thousand,' take a virtual tour of it, look at the pricing and order over the Internet -- without ever having to have a salesperson call them."

A need for speed?

Like all new technologies, the Internet was derived primarily as a mode of quick and efficient communication. This need for speed is not lost on the fitness industry whose dues-paying members expect the club to not only be equipped with the "latest and greatest," but that it be up and running and ready to be put to exercise use.

SportsTech Services, Tulsa, Okla., manufacturer of equipment accessories and replacement parts, understood the need for quick support when it began its fax-on-demand service. "We initially started out with fax on demand, where someone could directly fax requests for parts from our catalog," says customer service manager Chris Dodder. Now, he adds, they're transferring that information over to the Internet.

The need for quick and efficient service was the underlying reason for the creation of FAST, according to Athey. "Now, you have to call all of the different manufacturers [to order replacement parts]," he explains. "That's a lot of man hours to track and order, etc." But with their Web-based business, the benefit to the club owner is that there will be one centralized location to purchase parts online for all manufacturers' products.

The same is true for servicing broken equipment. Right now, Proulx explains, when a machine breaks down and a club owner calls for support, the operator logs the call and problem, and then dispatches someone. It's much cheaper for that to be done done via the Internet, without the need to hire an army of dispatchers. The benefit of speed, predicts Proulx, will make it only a matter of time before the Internet will become a ubiquitous means of communication in the fitness industry. FM

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